

UNDERSTANDING JOHN  
THE EVANGELIST'S "PNEUMA"

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The Holy Spirit's work in the Old Testament was not greatly different from that in the New Testament.... There is no change either in respect to the Holy Spirit and ecstaticism. He has always been a person and not a mere manifestation of ecstatic fervor.... And there is no change in respect to the Holy Spirit and evil spirits.<sup>1</sup>

The revelation of the role of the Holy Spirit, as the whole of sacred scripture, was not given in a sterile vacuum. And as much as many christian<sup>d</sup> would like to ignore it, the presence of a recognized canon of scripture speaks ~~itself~~ of a tradition that goes back, hopefully, to the very misty clouds of creation. It is reasonable, therefore, that in John the Evangelist's ~~reflection on~~<sup>the</sup> message of the "Logos" that this tradition is expressed. It is appropriate, then, to begin the study on the evolution (of man's understanding) of the Holy Spirit with the roots of the Evangelist's own understanding, which is the Old Testament.

The most common word in the Old Testament for "spirit" is the Hebrew term "ruach." This term has as its primary meaning, like the Greek term "pneuma," "air in the motion," and therefore means "wind" or "breath." There are a great many different opinions as to which of these two came first,

but most likely the former one.<sup>2</sup>

Behind man himself and behind all natural phenomena the ancients divined mysterious ~~power~~ powers that could be either kind or malevolent. God stands as it were at the center of these spiritual beings. At one point he may be simply the mightiest One among many deities, while at another (in a monotheistic system) he is the all-powerful One who alone creates. The forces of Nature are almost always regarded as the instruments of God. It is God that orders the stars in their courses, sends the wholesome rains, and influences seers, prophets and the leaders in every walk of life.

George Johnston in his book the Spirit-Paraclete in the Gospel of John writes, "'Spirit' in the Old Testament primarily means the active agent of divine work in nature, history, and chosen servants like the prophets. It is the energy or power of God."<sup>3</sup> He then goes on to point out, along with Daniel Lys, that as time went on the Jews concentrated the word less on natural processes and less even on supernatural or godlike realities. More and more it came to describe the moods and dispositions of man, his very self.<sup>4</sup>

Johnston then turns to a discussion on the inter-testamental and apocryphal material, particularly the Qumran literature. In much of this material is the key to a New Testament understanding of spirituality or "spirit-

ual-things." It aids in explaining how a severely mono-theistic-concrete thinking Jews could develop a cosmology that could include "principalities... powers...the rulers of the darkness of this world... spiritual wickedness in high places."<sup>5</sup> In the Qumran document, the Manual of Discipline (1QS 3:13-4:26) it is said that men are divided by divine decree (for the God of their Old Testament tradition always remains in ultimate control of everything in earth and heaven) into two classes governed respectively by a spirit of truth and a spirit of error. There is much to be said for the view that it refers generally to the human person as endowed with a given portion of good and evil elements. On the other hand, spirit sometimes alludes to an influence or power exercised from without man by the Prince or Angel of light in one case and by Belial, the Angel of Darkness, in another.<sup>6</sup>

Tontji Foedikoa in his M.Th. thesis, "A Study on the Holy Spirit and Human Spirit," quotes John Owen's description of the Spirit's activity in creation:

The word moved (merachepheh) signifies a gentle motion, like the dove over its nest, to communicate vital heat to its eggs, or to cherish its young. Without Him, all was a dead sea, a rude inform chaos; a confused heap covered with darkness: but by the moving of the Spirit of God upon it, he communicated a quickening prolific virtue.<sup>7</sup>

C.H.Dodd argues, however, that one needs to be wary of

*You could  
probably have  
just said  
"moved"  
directly*

reading post-third century A.D. Trinitarian theology into an ancient description of a manifestation of Elohim upon creation.<sup>8</sup> This is not to deny the Triune aspect of the Godhead but rather a question as to just how the Jews understood "the Spirit of the Lord" and more importantly (in view of our present study) how the Evangelist addresses that understanding.

Foedikoa continues that the locus classicus of the Spirit and creation of man is Genesis 2:7: "The Lord formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breadth of life; and man became a living being." And even though the word "rauch" does not appear in this text he feels that this verse refers to the work of the Holy Spirit. He feels that this view is justified because of Job's record (33:4): "The spirit of God hath made me, and the breath of the Almighty hath given me life."

It is interesting that the Evangelist picks up this theme in his controversial "Baptism in the Holy Spirit" passage:

Then the same day at evening, being the first day of the week, when the doors were shut where the disciples were assembled for fear of the Jews, came Jesus and stood in the midst, and said unto them, Peace be unto you.... And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and said unto them, Receive ye the Holy Ghost. (John 20: 19.22)

Johnston says that the Evangelist is narrating a new genesis which is to be understood only in the light of the incarna-

I agree

*Did someone  
steal your  
typewriter?  
just kidding!*

tion of the Logos-Christ and his death on the cross. He says the old Genesis of scripture had spoken of "Bauch" as active in the divine creation of the universe and man: but the new speaks rather of the divine Logos or "word". So at the dramatic close of his Gospel the Evangelist shows us this Logos-Christ, incarnate in Jesus and now "raised" to fresh glory as the Victor over death and over the Devil, making this new genesis an effective reality. He "breathed into" the disciples, as God had "breathed into" the nostrils of man the "breath of life." 9

Interestingly Dodd points out that because of such usage of the word "pneuma" in the above passage and passages such as 4:24 ("pneuma ho Theos...") that when the Evangelist uses the word he is not necessarily referring to the third person of the Godhead, but rather is using the word to define deity. 10 This seems to be very consistent with an Old Testament understanding of God. It becomes somewhat difficult then to give back to the Evangelist a first century understanding of the Cosmos, of which the "pneuma" plays a significant role, without coming to grips with the fact that much of our present exegesis broadens very closely to eisegesis. An excellent example of this is the Evangelist's use of the word "pneuma" in the Nicodemus encounter regarding being "born again."

Zane Hodges in an article entitled "Water and Spirit-John 3:5" <sup>11</sup> addresses this problem passage. He first addresses the question of the Evangelist's view of the sacraments. Though the scholars are ~~set~~ <sup>suffice</sup> at odds with each other over this question, ~~let it be enough~~ to say that John is a "Critical Sacramentalist," neither denying the validity of the sacraments nor exalting them but rather redefining and refocusing them.<sup>12</sup>

*Thank you!*

Hodges points out that for numerous expositors the conclusion that baptism is referred to in 3:5 appears inescapable. Thus, for example, Beasley-Murray insists, "As in John 6:51ff the exposition on eating the flesh of the Son of Man and drinking His blood cannot fail to bring to mind the Lord's Supper, so the reference to new birth by water and Spirit inevitably directs attention to Christian baptism."<sup>13</sup>

James Dunn in his dissertation counters by writing:

It is a sad commentary on the poverty of our own immediate experience of the Spirit that when we come across language in which the New Testament writers refer directly to the gift of the Spirit and to their experience of it, either we automatically refer it to the sacraments and can only give it meaning when we do (1 Cor. 6:11; 12:13; 2 Cor. 1:21f.; Eph. 1:13f.; Titus 3:5-7; John 3:5; 6:51-58, 63; 1 John 2:20, 27; 5:6-8; Heb. 6:4) or else we discount the experience described as too subjective and mystical in favour of a faith which is essentially an affirmation of biblical propositions,

or else we in effect psychologize the Spirit out of existence.<sup>14</sup>

Hodges concludes this section of his discussion with a note that unless one is committed to a sacramental orientation to Christian experience it is not necessary to see the Evangelist's reference to water as being merely sacramental. Hodges then goes over the "Water and Natural Birth" theory. It should be sufficient to say that the theory is not only redundant but also severely out of sync with first century thought. A more probable alternative in understanding Jesus' meaning is to translate "ean me tis gennēthe ex hudatos kai pneumatos," as "unless one is born of water and wind..." Hodges points out that the phraseology "of water and of the Spirit" is so thoroughly fixed in the tradition of both the ancient and modern versions of John 3:5, that practically no one ever calls the correctness of this familiar translation (into question.) Yet verse 8 shows plainly that the word "pneuma" can be rendered in two ways- as either "wind" or "spirit." The purpose in rendering the verse as such is that in this sense it begins to unfold the crucial meaning of "anōthen" in its significance of "from Above." For now the Lord has directed attention to natural phenomena which originate in heaven but have a vital and vivifying effect upon the earth. That is, in the semi-arid conditions of the Middle East, the waters that fell from heaven and were

brought by the winds that blew in heaven were eagerly desired by men and were obviously indispensable to human life. 15

Though it is ~~noones~~<sup>9</sup> desire to rid the text of scripture of its Triune picture of the All-mighty it would equally be unlawful for one to read back into the text of scripture a millenium of theologizing. And though I agree with Leon Wood that the Holy Spirit has always been the Holy Spirit (the opening quote to this paper), I find that it is an illusion to believe that He has always been understood as He presently is. John stands mid-stream in a tradition that finds a shadowy covenant making deity bursting forth before his very eyes in three Persons, one of which remains to this day in the person of the Spirit.

And he turned him unto his disciples,  
and said privately, Blessed are the  
eyes which see the things that ye  
see: For I tell you, that many prophets  
and kings have desired to see those  
things which ye hear, and have not  
heard them. Luke 10:23-24

Good work, Joe  
(and well written  
- weaknesses  
① your paper lacked  
focus (would subtitles have  
helped?!?) and should  
have narrowed down to  
one topic (meaning } BG 2 p 35, for ex.)  
② not complete  
conclusions are "funny" and  
reflect papers back of  
③ clear focus

## FOOTNOTES

1 Leon J. Wood, The Holy Spirit in the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976), pp.149-150.

2 David Hill, Greek Words and Hebrew Meanings (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1967), p.205.

3 George Johnston, The Spirit-Paraclete in the Gospel of John (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1970), p. 4.

4 ibid., p.4.

5 Ephesians 6:12b.

6 Johnston, pp.6-7.

7 Tontji F. Foedikoa, "A Study on the Holy Spirit and the Human Spirit," Diss. Talbot Theological Seminary, 1978, p. 8.

8 C.H. Dodd, The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1978), p.226.

9 Johnston, p.11.

10 Dodd, p.226.

11 Zane C. Hodges, "Water and Spirit - John 3:5," Bibliotheca Sacra, (July-Sept 1978), pp.206-220.

12 B. Grigsby, Class Notes, Biola College, La Mirada, California, March 10, 1981.

13 G. R. Beasley-Murray, Baptism in the New Testament (London: MacMillan & Co., 1963). pp.228-229.

14 James B. G. Dunn, Baptism in the Holy Spirit: A Re-examination of the New Testament Teaching on the Gift of the Spirit in Relation to Pentecostalism Today (London: SCM Press, 1970), pp. 225-226.

15 Hodges, pp. 215-216.

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*Commentaries?  
4 journal articles?*